

ROBERT MANGOLD

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BY DIANE WALDMAN THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK

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Brown Wall, 1964

Oil on wood, 96 x 96"

Courtesy Fischbach Gallery,
New York





Gray Window Wall, 1964

Oil on wood, 96 x 90". Destroyed

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D.W.

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of Abstract Expressionism, painters and sculptors maturing during the early sixties focused on issues that were in profound opposition to the first generation New York School. This in no way constituted a rejection of fifties painting; indeed, there was considerable admiration on the part of younger artists for the work of their predecessors. Nonetheless, the accomplishments of the fifties were more or less complete and offered little for future development but the prospect of dreary eclecticism. Where the Abstract Expressionists had realized a painting as a unique experience—the result of a series of mystical confrontations— younger painters of the early sixties were pragmatic in their approach to art. For both the Pop artists and the so-called color abstractionists, the blank canvas no longer functioned as the void. It served instead as the final state, the receptacle for ideas that were carefully considered and worked out well in advance of confronting the canvas. *Area* replaced *arena*, the metaphysical was renounced in favor of rationalism. Key phases of fifties painting were rendered obsolete: the attitude of *crisis*, the belief in working every portion of the canvas, the documentation of the act of painting were inconsequential to sixties painting. Brushwork and gesture, the immediate and intimate contact with the canvas were replaced by an attitude which considered craft unimportant or undesirable, preferring industrial techniques and an impersonal surface. Of course, neither the Abstract Expressionists nor their younger counterparts held consistently to these conditions; the Abstract Expressionists were as rigorously conceptual as their younger counterparts, who were far from impersonal. If the Abstract Expressionists cultivated chance incidents to activate their paintings, this was offset by

concepts which, if not as rigorously predetermined, were, nonetheless, very much a part of the act of painting. Accident, while not used as such by the Minimalists, still informs the best of their art, where the inconsistencies account for a large measure of their fascination. In their common approach to art, both the Abstract Expressionists and the younger artists mitigated the sterility of the absolute by means of the vitality or excitement caused by the unexpected. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, there was in fact a profound ideological shift in emphasis from one generation to another. Precedents existed, however, even within the New York School, in the work of Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, and Mark Rothko. For the Minimalists the *White on White* series of Malevitch and Rodchenko's constructions were equally crucial, if less immediate, influences.

The Minimalists, of whom Robert Mangold is a nominal member, shared a passion for geometric forms, using the triangle, rectangle and square, the circle and cube. Their basic component units were repetitive rather than hierarchical, forming a composition often arrived at by arithmetic means which avoided a fixed center of interest. They preferred a singular rather than fragmented image that could be appraised immediately. Far from absolute in their final result, the Minimalists managed to introduce a fair amount of illusionism (Judd) into sculpture, poetry into stacking, piling, aligning (Andre), theater into static forms (Morris). Like the other Minimalists, Mangold's work differs considerably from the larger definition of the group. While the quintessential character of his work falls decidedly within this ambience, his work benefits from the unexpected nuance and especially from the subtle arrangements of color that are a significant departure from the geometry of his forms.

The paintings that Mangold exhibited in his first one-man show at the Thibaut Gallery in New York in January 1964, shortly after he had received his M.F.A. from Yale, consisted of amorphous but unobtrusive forms, faintly curvilinear in disposition. Looking like fragments of larger forms, and inherently directional, they existed in a tense but ambivalent relationship with the static, frontal identity of the ground. Mangold's need to realize the paintings as objects soon led him to the addition of bolts, moldings, and other projections, and in 1964-65, in a group of works that he called *Walls*, to the use of relief. The walls, of sprayed oil on wood, appeared on the verge of breaking into free-standing environments, a direction that he soon repudiated. More significantly, the first paintings of 1963-64 had indicated, in their use of curvilinear figures, a fondness for shape that Mangold realized in a more satisfying context in his *Area* paintings of 1965-67. In a work like *Warm Gray Area*, 1965-66 (cat. no. 2), for example, Mangold confined the activity to the edges of the canvas and simultaneously accomplished several objectives that had eluded him in the work of 1964. By eliminating the figure-ground relationship of the earlier paintings, he could stress the dynamics of the image as an overall unitary structure which was perfectly in keeping with his assertion of the painting as an object. He further amplified this by cutting away at the contour of the canvas support and relating the painting as an object to the wall. Like Frank Stella, whose aluminum paintings of 1960 were an important influence, this procedure enabled Mangold to permit the wall to function as a part of the painting and subvert geometry. For Stella it was the logical consequence of his configuration—the stripe, which reached its ultimate conclusion when he cut away the center of his canvas. In Mangold's work this was

systematically reinforced by splitting his canvas in two, the resulting seam acting as an incisive division of the image. Unlike Stella, Mangold has never relied on the thickness of his stretcher bars to accentuate the object quality of the painting. Instead, he has used a single color per painting or one color for several paintings to stress the *reality* of his structures.

In the paintings of 1965-66, Mangold featured a type of color gradation which, although monochromatic, was considerably varied in nuance. As the artist has expressed it, he was interested in avoiding certain obvious types of color relationships and was especially concerned with a type of color that was featureless—no color rather than *naming* colors, as Kelly has remarked about his own work. For Mangold the most overriding concern is for form to which color is related, although color in itself remains important; in this respect he is closer to the Minimalists and Stella than to Kelly. Using an airbrush allowed Mangold to circumvent the *hand* that was so prominent a feature of Abstract Expressionism, and to present a featureless, anonymous surface—a particular characteristic of sixties painting and sculpture. Anonymity of surface, of course, is not a denial of choice, and Mangold's color is ultimately as intimate and personal, if not as opulent or as easily available as de Kooning's more seductive marriage of color and pigment. But neither is his color representative of the banal juxtaposition of much geometric abstraction. As it appears in these early paintings of Mangold, color is both hue and tone, often imbued with a pearly opalescence that permits the maximum light and light refraction to occur. Mangold's paintings were nothing if not subtle in their effects, and totally at variance with the retinal phenomena of Op art, in vogue at that time.

Concurrent with the subtle quasi-chromatic, quasi-tonal relationships that Mangold established in these paintings were the divisions of his canvas, derived from butting and notching, which were often off-center and certainly never very aggressive or dynamic in their configuration. As he has explained:

Have used the 4-foot width of sheets of building material as a working element, a piece whose total size is 96 x 96 inches (2 4-foot by 8-foot sheets), would have a vertical division occurring in the middle, the division becoming a black line at this point. Chose not to allow the panel break to occur, except at the measured center, keeping it from becoming a proportional-compositional division. Visually, the central black line gives the eye a neutral point to move through the surface, bringing the periphery line inside, preventing a too simple contour reading and preventing the surface itself from becoming too illusionary.¹

In this respect, Mangold differed from the Minimal sculptors, for their emphasis on symmetry and standard units was somewhat at variance with his liking for irregularity within symmetry. Too, Mangold has shown little inclination to stress the attractive qualities of materials, an important consideration for the Minimalists, or to stress the materiality of paint, as has Robert Ryman, another painter who figured prominently among the Minimalists. Mangold has consistently qualified his shape, earlier by notching or segmenting it, and more recently by warping or distortion. We remain aware, however, of the completed shape and thus retain the geometric figure from which the final form was derived.

1. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1966, "Work Comments, 1965-66," *Systemic Painting*, p. 25.





Installation view, exhibition Fischbach Gallery,
New York, October/November 1970



Yellow Wall Section I. 1964

Oil on wood, 96 x 48".

Courtesy Fischbach Gallery, New York

Mangold's paintings of 1965-66 were flat cut-out forms of masonite-faced plywood which offered him a resistant surface that he preferred to the pliant give of canvas. By using an assertive material like masonite, Mangold could continually call attention to the surface. He decided on a spray technique to achieve an atmospheric quality enabling him to blend color and tone. The gradations of tone occurred at the lower edge of the structure and were purposefully kept subtle to allow the form to dominate a surface which expanded and dissolved. Mangold was primarily concerned with evasive color which was difficult to pin down or define. This could best be achieved with an oil paint which blended easily, unlike acrylic, and by the spray technique which permitted a refining of the form rather than serving as a vehicle for color. As Mangold has said, "Color sequence is either (going from top to bottom), neutral moving into color, color moving into neutral, or from lighter to darker value of the same color. Where it is a neutral to color or color to neutral sequence, the value of the two tones is similar."² In all instances, the modulation served to reiterate the edges. While the *Walls* made reference to architecture, the *Areas* alluded to patches of sky, the space between two buildings, or a wall. Mangold worked with both symmetric and asymmetric forms, diptych and polyptic arrangements and in 1966, began to introduce the curve. The curve, which formed the lower edge of the painting, is a segment of a circle, whose geometry Mangold preferred to either organic or elliptical forms. The fragmentation of a known form, implying continuation into space, suggested a limitless field.

Initially Mangold used a quarter or a half circle. He retained the sprayed oil surface that he

first developed in 1964 but his color became less atmospheric as he curtailed the shift in hues in favor of tonal gradation of one color. Mangold's use of the spray gun can be seen as an extension of the Minimalists' interest in depersonalizing the mark, but he has managed to produce a surface that is highly individual if not self-expressive. In 1968 Mangold decided to use a roller and acrylic paint and his color became considerably more intense. This procedure eliminated the subtle tints, the discreet shading from tan to brown, the carefully neutralized edge of earlier paintings. While still characteristically restrained, the newer colors were far more opaque and appeared to have a dense texture resembling a skin that was far more consistent with the precision of his geometric forms than any atmospheric color would have been.

By confining pictorialism to the structure of the painting, Mangold could, as in the earlier notched paintings, minimize the importance of line and eliminate any figure-ground relationship, such as occurred in his paintings of 1963. This in turn prevented any inordinate fluctuation of space and denied any possibility of a positive-negative spatial confrontation from taking place. As if to reinforce the implacable presence of the shape, Mangold switched from evasive color to more aggressive color. While more opaque and considerably more intense, the pigments were still subdued, enhancing form rather than advancing color in and of itself. Mangold accomplished this by repeating the same form in several colors, as if to deny the uniqueness of a particular hue in relation to a particular form, and by choosing tones which are muted rather than pure, even when he had used a primary (blue) or a complementary (green) color. The effect is monotonal, rather than monochromatic.

Initially the circle, or sections of the circle, enabled Mangold to develop an alternative to the notched form, and to affect variations on a geometric form without pushing geometry into sterile formulas. Gradually, however, Mangold began to complicate the circle. Where he had built out his rectangles, adding a part here, subtracting there, he began to subdivide the segments of a circle into smaller units. These units retained an interior consistency which the earlier additive (notched) paintings lacked. While maintaining the relationship between shape and the wall, Mangold could elicit a series of images that in no way interfered with his denial of the image-ground relationship. These canvases, based on V, W or X configurations allowed Mangold to return to a form of drawing which did not lose their hold on the wall. The series, in turn, was complemented by another group of works, entitled *Frames*, in which Mangold literally cut away the center of his painting while still holding the frame as shape. In these paintings, the wall assumed a greater, and certainly more active role than in his previous paintings. Because Mangold has always been concerned with illusionism, or a form of illusionism that was best expressed by stressing the reality of the painting as an object, this series enabled him to expand upon this idea. He does this by contrasting the principle of the frame as the painting with the spatial implications of the frame leading into the pictorial space which ordinarily was occupied by the central part of the image. The earlier ambiguity of color, in the *Area* paintings, was replaced by the ambiguity of shape, whose contours, while emphatic, did not fulfill their expected role.

In subsequent works, Mangold has again considered the circle, this time as a distorted figure warped to conform to an irregular square, and the manipulation of an X configuration within a group of rectangles whose dimensions vary considerably from one to another. Like his discreetly sprayed colors, the warping and bending are subtle and their variations minute in quality. Mangold's emphasis on a serial imagery since 1969 has enabled him to diminish the importance of a single painting and emphasize the visual harmony of a sequential arrangement. In his recent *X-Series* drawings of 1970, for example, he grouped 15 works in 5 sets of three, each "x" identifying the rectangle. The rectangle itself varied significantly from group to group. Similarly, in his *Distorted Square-Circle* series of 1971, he has contrasted a "real" or true square whose dimensions are 60 x 60 x 60 x 60" (cat. no. 21) with "distorted" squares which, to cite one example, measures 60 x 60 x 63 x 63" (cat. no. 22). Nevertheless, the end result is a group of serial works in which geometry is subverted by an infraction of the rules of order.

Mangold is not only questioning the way we see but gracefully manipulating form to new ends. By aligning his warped circles with the edges of the rectangle, at least in part, and by making his open frames both image and field, at least by implication, he has remained consistent in his adherence to the all-over image. But in this manipulation, he has proven that his approach is eminently flexible, and singularly open-ended. None of the dogma or ritual that informs much geometric or color painting is evident in his work. Rather, his paintings are introspective and contemplative. They are paintings of spaces and silences.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION



Dimensions are given in inches; height precedes width; in irregularly shaped works dimensions indicate widest and highest points

Paintings

- 1 *Manilla Neutral Area*. 1965
Oil on masonite and plywood
96 x 96"; 2 panels, each 48 x 96"
Collection Philip Johnson, New Canaan, Connecticut
- 2 *Warm Gray Area*. 1965-66
Oil on masonite
72 x 72"; 2 panels, each 36 x 72"
Courtesy Fischbach Gallery, New York
- 3 **Untitled*. 1966
Oil on masonite
24 x 24"
Collection Donald Droll, New York





5



4 *Cool Gray Area with Curved Diagonal*. 1966

Oil on masonite

96 x 96"; 2 panels: 96 x 48", 83¼ x 48"

Collection Philip Johnson, New Canaan,
Connecticut

5 *Light Neutral Area*. 1966

Oil on masonite

48 x 52"

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Robert A. M. Stern,
New York





7

6 *1/4 Manilla Curved Area*. 1967

Oil on masonite

72 x 72"

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Fischbach,
New York

7 *1/2 Blue-Gray Curved Area (Central Section)*.

1967

Oil on masonite

72 x 72"; 2 panels, each 36 x 72"

Courtesy Fischbach Gallery, New York



8 *1/2 Manilla Curved Area (Divided)*. 1967

Oil on masonite

48 x 192"; 4 panels, each 48 x 48"

Collection Donald Droll, New York

9 *1/2 Manilla Curved Area (Trisected)*. 1967

Oil on masonite

72 x 144"

Gift of the Friends of the Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York





11

- 10 **1/2 Brown Circle Area*. 1967
Oil on masonite
12 x 24"
Collection Dan Graham, New York
- 11 *1/2 V Series*. 1968
Acrylic on masonite
48 x 96"; 2 panels, each 48 x 48"
Courtesy Fischbach Gallery, New York
- 12 *1/2 W Series*. 1968
Acrylic on masonite
48 x 96"; 2 panels, each 48 x 48"
Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York,
Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund, 1969



13 *V Series Central Diagonal IA*. 1968

Acrylic on masonite

48 x 72"

Collection Mr. and Mrs. John Lee Sherman,
Roosevelt, New Jersey





14

- 14 *W Series Central Section Vertical*. 1968

Acrylic on masonite

48 x 48"

Collection Stephen Antonakos and
Naomi Spector, New York

- 15 *Central Vertical (Blue) X Series*. 1968

Acrylic on masonite

48 x 48"

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Fischbach,
New York

15



16 *X Series Central Diagonal No. 2.* 1968

Acrylic on masonite

48 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 96 $\frac{3}{4}$ "; 2 panels, each 48 x 48"

Collection The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,
New York







17

17 *X Paintings*. 1969

Acrylic on canvas

5 paintings, each 60 x 40"

Courtesy Fischbach Gallery, New York

- 18 *1/2 X Series. 1969
Acrylic on masonite
24 x 48"
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Vogel, New York
- 19 *X Series Central Diagonal I A & B. 1969
Acrylic on masonite
2 panels, each 12 x 18"
Collection Sol LeWitt, New York
- 20 *Untitled Frame Set A*. 1970
Acrylic on masonite
2 panels, each 72 x 36"
Courtesy Fischbach Gallery, New York

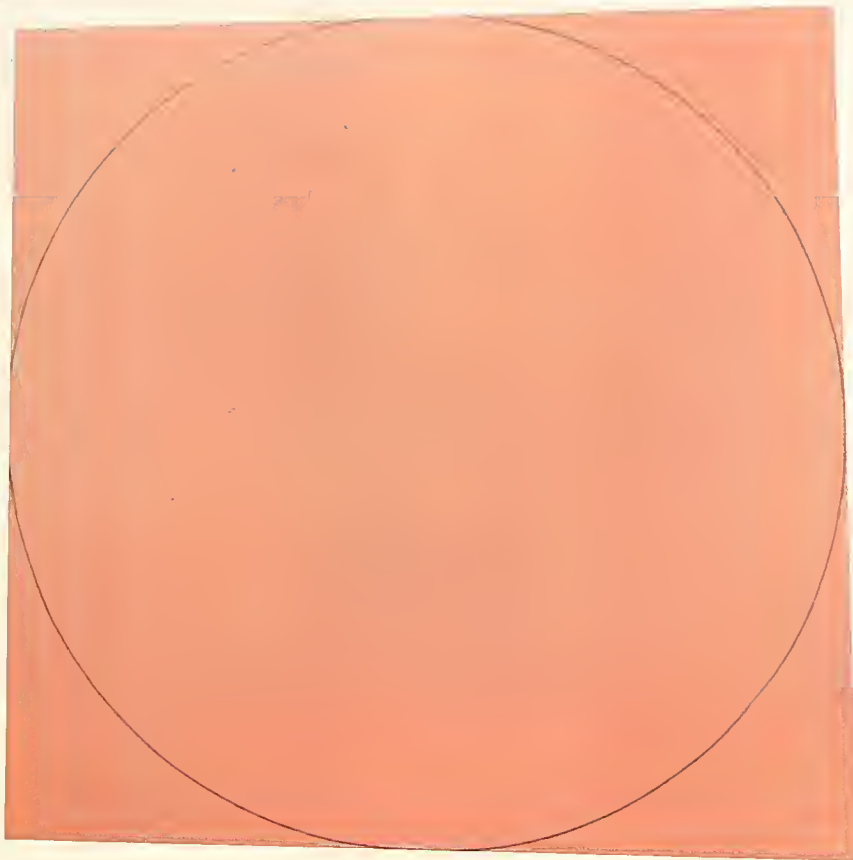




21



21 *Green Distorted Square Circle*. 1971
Acrylic on canvas
Right and top: 60 x 60"; Left and bottom: 60 x 66"
Courtesy Fischbach Gallery, New York



22

22 *Red Distorted Square Circle*. 1971

Acrylic on canvas

Right and top: 63 x 60"; Left and bottom: 60 x 63"

Courtesy Fischbach Gallery, New York



23 *Curved Line X Set*. 1971
Acrylic on canvas
Two panels, each 48 x 30"
Courtesy Fischbach Gallery, New York



- 24 *Straight Curved Line X Set*. 1971
 Acrylic on canvas
 Two panels, each 48 x 30"
 Courtesy Fischbach Gallery, New York
- 25 **Straight-Curved-Bent Line X Set*. 1971
 Acrylic on masonite
 17 x 22"
 Collection Dan Graham, New York

*Drawings

- 26 *W, V, X Series*. 1969
Pencil
22½ x 13¾"
Collection Sol LeWitt, New York
- 27 *Untitled*. 1969
Pencil
3 drawings, each 39½ x 27½"
Collection Brice Marden, New York
- 28 *Untitled*. 1969
Pencil
3 drawings, each 39½ x 27½"
Collection Mimi Wheeler, New York
- 29 *Untitled*. 1970
Pencil
30⅞ x 44¼"; 2 sections, each 30⅞ x 22⅞"
Collection Ruth Vollmer, New York
- 30 *Distorted Circle-Square Series*. 1971
Pencil
17 x 30"
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Vogel, New York

BIOGRAPHY

- 1937 Born in North Tonawanda, New York
- 1956-1959 Studied at the Cleveland Institute of Art, Ohio
- 1959 Yale University, Norfolk, Connecticut, Summer Art Fellowship
- 1961 Yale University, New Haven, B.F.A.
- 1963 Yale University, New Haven, M.F.A.
- from 1963 Teaching at the School of Visual Arts, New York
- 1964-1965 Taught at Hunter College, New York
- 1968 Taught at Skowhegan Summer Art School, Maine
- 1969 Taught at Yale-Norfolk Summer Art School, Connecticut
- 1970 Taught at Cornell University Summer Art School, New York

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41. Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York, *Concepts*, April 30-June 11, 1969.
Catalogue foreword by Russell Connor.
42. Westmoreland County Museum of Art, Greensburg, Pennsylvania, *Recent Trends In American Art*, May 25-July 6, 1969.
43. Fort Worth Art Center Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, *Drawings*, October 21-November 30, 1969.
44. Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, *Art for the Moratorium*, December 12-13, 1969. Announcement.
45. Newark College of Engineering, Newark, New Jersey, *Shaped Art*, 1969.
46. Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Recent Acquisitions*, October 24, 1969-May 25, 1970.
47. Rose Art Gallery, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, *Vision and Television*, January 21-February 22, 1970.
48. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, *Modular Paintings*, April 21-May 24, 1970.
Exhibition organized and catalogue essay by Robert Murdock.
49. Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, *Summer Show*, July 8-August 30, 1970.
Invitation/Catalogue.
50. 25th Anniversary Exhibition of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Exhibition traveled to Colby College, Waterville, Maine, August 6-September 16, 1970, and Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine, October 20-November 29, 1970.
51. Finch College Art Museum, New York, *Finch College Poster Exhibition*, October-November 1970.
52. Chico Art Center, Chico, California, *Drawing Exhibition*, 1970.
53. Marion Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, *Concepts/Drawings*, April 20-May 21, 1971.

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ROBERT MANGOLD